



# Flowers for Her



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## Chapter 1 by Amanda Stefan

"I found some!" Jared cried from somewhere I couldn't see. I ducked under a long blade of grass, cutting in front of a disgruntled ant's path in my rush to reach him. It waved its antenna in annoyance before continuing on.

"Where?!" I shouted.

"Here!" he shouted back, this time his voice garbled through a mouthful of something.

I finally broke into a clearing, the speckled light that filters through the grass suddenly turning into a blast of direct sunlight. I squinted up at the bush that Jared had climbed up. He was munching on the base of a stalk covered in purple-blue flowers.

"Forget-me-nots," I said with a nod of approval, "Those are perfect."

Jared said nothing, but at that moment his jaws tore through the last of the stem's fibres, and with a rustle of air flowing past petals, it fell. I braced myself to try and catch it, getting knocked over for my concern.

"Oof."

Jared's head poked out, having the decency to look a little guilty.

"Are you ok?" he asked.

"I'll live," I said, wiggling out from underneath the stem, "How many do you need again?"

"As many as I can get," he said, already inching his way up the bush to the next branch of flowers,

"We have until sunset."

"I'll help," I said, hurrying to the base of the bush and reaching out to stick my walking legs to the fuzzy stem. I crawled my way up, my stripped back getting hot under the sun, but ignored the uncomfortable heat of being exposed. No birds would try to make me into lunch as long as I had

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We continued like that for what felt like hours, working as fast as we could to cover the ground below us with an unbundled bouquet of forget-me-nots.

"Alright!" Jared said at last, "That should be enough!"

I almost cried in relief. My mouth tasted like bad lettuce and sawdust.

But that was only half the battle. It took a few more hours to drag the flowers into a neat pile, stems all pointing in the same direction, and at least one more for Jared to figure out how to tie them together tightly enough so that they wouldn't come loose. His fingerless legs were clumsy with the twined grass, and more than once he simply bit through the thing and started over again.

After it was done, we both sat back for a few breathless moments.

"They look...really nice," I said, nodding slightly. If I had elbows, I would have crossed my arms in front of my chest.

"Really?" Jared asked, squirming a little, "Do you think she'll like them?"

"She'll love them," I said, "No doubt about it. You two are basically already married."

Jared scoffed, but I could practically feel his satisfaction buzz through the air.

"Alright," he said, "Let's hurry, it'll be sundown soon. Change back."

"Yessir," I said, wiggling my foreleg in my best attempt at a salute. Jared laughed.

Changing back had always been easier for me. My older sister once told me that it was because I was stupid, but somehow I don't think that was it. All I had to do was stretch out my legs, mutter a few memorized phrases in a language I didn't understand, and poof. I was back to normal in a burst of white smoke.

"Fingers," I said, wiggling them happily, "How I have missed you."

I couldn't hear Jared talk anymore, but I knew he'd complain that I was slow once he'd also turned back, so I bent over and grabbed the bouquet, Jared clinging to the stems tightly. He was stripped black, yellow, and white, still too small to worry about cocoons but plenty old enough to worry about love, apparently.

The trip back to the village wasn't a long one, but I still took it at a jog. The grass scraped at my knees, socks squelching with water from when Jared and I had stumbled into the creek early that morning. It was uncomfortable, but I had to be strong in our battle for true love.

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checking to see if her daughter had garnered as many suitors as had been predicted in the months leading up to this day?

It was an impressive sight, at the very least. There was every imaginable bloom, both local flowers from the fields that surrounded the village and exotic ones from the fancy flower shop in the town square where there was a greenhouse for growing all types of flowers anywhere. The bouquets were pushed close together, never piled on top of one another, every available inch of lawn covered. The reds, pinks, blues, and oranges made my eyes hurt.

Butterflies flocked through the air, doing laps around her yard as they waited for sundown to come. The rest were perched on the shoulders of two-legs like me, each waiting at the edge of the property with bouquet in hand for her to come out. Jared was the only caterpillar I saw. I felt an inkling of doubt (he didn't have a chance) but pushed it down quickly. This was the most important day of Jared's life. This was true love. (Or at least, I hoped it was true love. My mouth still tasted like plants in the worst kind of way, and if it was for anything less than the truest love of all time, I was going to be extremely upset with Jared).

The sun set with little fanfare. The last of the butterflies alighted on their bouquets, cleaning their antennae nervously as they waited for her to come out. I knew that Jared was probably shaking with excitement, although I couldn't bring myself to tear my eyes away from the front door long enough to check.

There was a collective holding of breath as the door clicked open. She stepped out, the girl with black hair and a pink dress smiling at all of them. Without a single word, a puff of smoke appeared, and a brilliant blue swallowtail flew forward.

The lawn exploded into smoke.

I sneezed, waving my hand to try and get the smoke to clear a little. When it did clear, at least three dozen men ranging from Jared's youth to one old enough to be a great-grandfather were standing on the property, each holding their bouquets out for her to judge.

Jared glanced up at me, hands full of the forget-me-nots. The blue petals exploded in bursts from his fists, suddenly looking more substantial from his enthusiasm to be holding them on this day at all. One of his pant legs was soaked up to the knee, and he was covered in burs and bits of leaves. Despite all of this, his eyes were bright as he wielded the flowers for her to see.

She flew through the crowd, looking at each bouquet and then at each of her suitors' heads. She spent a moment looking at a bundle of honeysuckle brandished by the blacksmith's son, then she thought that she had stopped at him, but a moment later she was gone.

As she neared us, Jared started to bounce on the ball of his foot, trying to let out some of his nervous energy. I jabbed him in the back to make him stop, but he didn't even flinch at my touch.

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His eyes were on her, bright as stars and twice as unwavering.

She was two suitors away, lingering on the lilies.

One suitor away, tasting the tulips.

I was worried that Jared might faint as she alighted on the forget-me-nots. She didn't stay to drink for long, quickly taking flight to circle around Jared in lazy loops. With a poof, she stood in front of him, tucking a lock of hair behind an ear.

Everyone stared as she leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss to Jared's forehead.

"Precious child," I heard her murmur, offering one last brilliant smile before turning back into a butterfly and continuing on her way.

When she finished her rounds, she landed one last time on her mother's shoulder. They both looked out on the sea of men, the mother looking as dangerous as mothers tend to look about their children.

"Your gifts are accepted," announced the burly woman, "You have laboured hard in a form without hands to bring us these flowers, and my family thanks you on this day; my daughter's courting day. Let the festivities begin!"

That night, she did not choose any of the men who gave her flowers. But as we left, Jared had a secret smile on his lips, a blush painting his cheeks russet.

I still wasn't sure about whether or not it was true love, but things went well enough, in my opinion.

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